

Youth unemployment Outline of a psychosocial perspective

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SUMMARY

This analysis of education policy constitutes an attempt to outline the problem of youth unemployment. Building on a recognition that structural change in the 'society of labourers' has also affected the social entity 'young people', it shows the problems inherent in our concept of linear transitions to working life and the need to learn to live with imponderables, by gradually freeing ourselves of the illusion of full-time employment and of waiting for things to improve. The answer to the question of who is equipped to cope with life will ever less often be 'the person with a secure job' and ever more often 'the person who is competent to handle transitions'. So in the context of youth unemployment, what is needed is a change of direction, from a burden-oriented coping paradigm based on a deficit to a competence-oriented coping paradigm. However, all young people (and not only those belonging to special risk categories) need models and concepts of success for this new skill. This means that there is a socio-political task facing society as a whole, as well as a need for young people affected by unemployment to cope with their working career.

Key words

Adolescents,
access to vocational training,
disadvantaged group,
self-esteem,
social inclusion,
coping strategies,
underemployment.

Introduction

Young people today are a generation that has been cheated. They want nothing more than to be integrated into working life, but constantly experience rejection and refusal. In the process, unemployment has become a reality in their working career. Many young people interpret such experiences as a misanthropic message: 'Society has no use for you. You might as well not have been born.' For years they believed parents and teachers who told them that 'you (...) (need to) work hard and loyally, everyone according to his occupation and position, (and) man (...) (was) born to work as birds were born to fly' (Luther, 1962, p. 21). They learned that this means

that success at school and educational qualifications are the main sources sustaining later working careers. Now, however, as they seek a traineeship or a job, they are finding that the 'society of labourers' is displaying an increasing shortage of jobs, which affects *them*. It is not only young people with very limited qualifications who are now encountering such scenarios. Even high-level educational qualifications no longer guarantee problem-free integration into the employment system (Lüde, 1998). So it is understandable if young people perceive the unsuccessful quest for a traineeship as a 'prior conviction' imposed on them. Education is supposed to be profitable? What's the point of my life then, when I work hard at school but end up being one of society's losers anyway? To date young people have received virtually no answer to questions like this. Even in a society that socialises young people with a view to employment and expects them to be willing to work, but at the same time in reality denies them work. It is obvious that a 'late modern double-bind situation' of this kind can only lead to fundamental insecurity.

This analysis of education policy sets out to take up these problem areas on the basis of the theory and empirical experience of developmental psychology and socio-pedagogy. Building on an initially trivial hypothesis, namely that structural change in the society of labourers has included the social entity 'young people', against the background of considerations of developmental psychology and vocational education it shows the need for a change of direction for all young people, from a burden-oriented paradigm to a coping paradigm.

Our double-bind society

What is our society doing, against a background in which young people are being denied a socialisation through to adult existence that is assumed to be ongoing? And what are we doing about the fact that we have found no answers to the above questions from young people? It is true of the German-speaking regions at least that we claim, firstly, to be convinced that an imminent economic upturn will lead to a decline in unemployment and will once again guarantee full employment and training and job security. All that is required for this 'standard' employment relationship to take effect for all, and also and in particular for young people to be integrated into training and employment, is for sufficient State funds to be expended (Thoma, 2003). Secondly, we declare that youth unemployment is a problem of deviance and that assistance to young people is a state-approved remedial exercise, and thereby assure ourselves that we are taking youth unemployment seriously, as a most urgent problem. And thirdly, we cite the results of the vast body of research, which are always the same, and which demonstrate to all of us, particularly the young, the looming material, mental, social and health-related burdens that accompany unemployment.

Although this is not our intention, in perpetuating these patterns of argument we are spreading a poison that does even more damage to everybody. The vocabulary we use alone promotes youth unemployment at the level of a paradigm based on the individual burden. It is to this that such terms refer as 'disadvantaged young people', 'risk trends', 'the fate of integration into employment' and the 'educationally disadvantaged' – these terms imply that youth unemployment is to be understood as a failure for which the individual bears responsibility, a departure from the standard career history. How do young people themselves deal with such inferences? For the moment still in a very positive fashion, in that they are still trying to live according to their 'career illusions' (Bourdieu, 1990). Despite the dark clouds on the horizon, they ignore the structural criteria and effects of the labour market. They seek an occupation that has to be their ideal occupation, which will be enjoyable, will suit them, and will promote their self-development. However, this individual perspective is by no means confined to young people, but is a 'guide rail' to which late-modern man orients himself (Thomä, 2002).

The truth is that in view of the acute shortage of traineeships, large numbers of young people are denied the development hitherto marked out as the norm, and the move from student to worker cannot take place, so that the protected educational space is inevitably extended. For this very reason, insecurity and uncertainty increase dramatically, and mental reorientation gradually becomes apparent. This may have both positive and negative effects. It is positive when reorientation leads to (hesitant) abandonment of the concept of the ideal and to a new, more realistic, orientation of vocational ambitions and hence results in stabilisation of mental welfare (Haerberlin et al., 2005), but it may also lead to increased competitive pressure and pressure to achieve. However, if the result of the reorientation is that the hitherto optimistic view of one's own ability to take action ('self-effectiveness') is replaced by resignation and retreat, the effects are not only negative, but also actively alarming. The individual then seems to be pre-programmed to flounder on the contradiction between opportunities for action and normative orientation.

The society of labourers as a 'discontinued model'

'What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of labourers without labour, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.' Today this observation, made by Hannah Arendt in the Prologue to her 1958 book *The Human Condition*, has, with only a few exceptions, become a reality for Europe. In fact we are light years away from a modern society of labourers in which full employment is the norm. However, our society continues to live in accordance with the concept of a stan-

dard career history based on paid employment, under the premise of full employment (Schmid, 2002; for critical comment, see also Beck, 2005). Despite globalisation and automation, she sees gainful employment as pivotal and crucial to success for the individual in coping with life, and regards all other areas as less critical. Not only is work possessed of omnipotent significance, but, according to Max Weber (1988), it has also actually become a religion, a post-modern 'meaning of life'. From the perspective of social and vocational education, work is important, firstly to the development of a material livelihood, and also, secondly, to the development of a personal and social identity (Galuske, 1986). If everything is subordinated to employment but there is none, and life plans are consequently put at risk, the feasibility of this concept threatens to become a fiction. This applies not only to the working population, but also and in particular to young people, to their transition from school to working life and from vocational training to employment. However, both transitions are taking place in a manner that is anything but straightforward (Isengard, 2001; Meyer et al., 2003).

There is a major problem here, not only because statistics show that in Europe at least one in seven young people is affected by unemployment, but also because this means that as a result this young person is completely unable to take a crucial step – to acquire a working identity via integration into the adult world and preparation for a working career. However, ever since Erikson (1974), a working identity – committing oneself in the employment sphere – has been regarded as one of the key development tasks for young people, which also include leaving the parental home, developing their own system of standards and values, or starting a relationship. If this means that this stage of life serves to elaborate the key elements of one's personal identity, it seems highly likely that the fundamental insecurity brought about by unemployment must have far-reaching consequences on young people's development. In the light of the 'end of the society of labourers' (Negt, 1998), is it even possible for them still to develop such a thing as a working identity and subjective and meaningful work orientations respectively? Or would it not be much more sensible to remain 'confused in the sense in which Erikson uses the word, i.e. deliberately not to decide on anything, to avoid commitments and also not to develop any clear value structures and preferences? Such questions could prove redundant in future. At the very least, it can be assumed that owing to the structural change in our society of labourers, this traditional model of identity development *can no longer apply*, and that a working identity is being replaced by an integrity that tends to be geared to the world of life.

Against this background, however, how do young people actually *behave*? A look at various studies (Raab, 1996; Steinmann, 2000; Amosa, 2004; Meyer et al., 2003) shows that from the point of view of developmental psychology, superficially their behaviour is ideal. Young people work actively on their work identity, and hence also on occupational self-socialisation (Keupp et al., 2002). Initially they adopt a standard career his-

tory pattern. To them, this means striving for vocational training and subsequently moving on to a permanent full-time job. Even more than that, they struggle to achieve their ideal job and hold on to their strongly occupation- and work-based thinking. So they experiment in their quest for the job they want – to stimulate smooth, direct integration, they write (too) many applications, but also knowingly accept diversions and holding patterns. Is this making linear transitions a discontinued model, marking the end of the old order? It would almost seem so, for such linearity presupposes normality, and in the light of the many 'now and thens', the 'both/ands', or the 'neither/nors', normality has become unsustainable. Owing to this new dynamic, the constant toing and froing, these transitions have also recently been christened 'yo-yo' transitions (Iris, 2001; du Bois-Reymond, 2004). This term represents the increasingly risky, reversible and unplannable transitions, with their constant toing and froing between independence and dependence, between adolescent and adult status. State-sponsored employment and bridging programmes also constitute a fundamental basis for these yo-yo transitions. Admittedly these programmes improve people's lot and are undoubtedly justified, but the way in which they define their target group means that they relabel unemployment as an education problem, deteriorate into holding patterns (Galuske, 1986), and so ultimately individualise the causes of the problem. Yo-yo transitions are by no means always a matter of choice, but are, in the majority of cases, unavoidable, and also, depending on material, social and personal resources, stigmatise those involved.

Empirical experience of youth unemployment

In our society, the mood on the subject of youth unemployment is threatening to reach a new low point. Anybody who cannot see this should read the stories in the papers. They provide headlines almost every day. They talk of 'traineeship drama' or 'traineeship disaster' (*Die Welt*, 2003), of 'Anxiety about livelihood in the classroom' or of a 'Time bomb of unemployed young people' (*Bildung Schweiz*, 2003). The range of statistics and research findings also offer a clear message – in Europe, some 15% of young people aged 15 to 19 are unemployed. Out in front are Spain, Greece and Italy with 25% (State Secretariat for the Economy, 2005). In Switzerland, the figures for youth unemployment are 7.1% in the 20-24 age group and approx. 4.1% in the 15-19 age group, which are fairly low in comparison with the international average, but still much too high in terms of the thousands of job seekers involved and the tripling of rates in the last two years. In addition, a whole series of negative consequences are concealed behind these data. It is true that since PISA (German PISA Consortium, 2001) and TREE (Meyer et al., 2003), the two studies of most relevance to issues of this kind, they have become part of 'education-policy folklore',

but they are nevertheless impressive. For example, the data show that in Germany, Belgium and Switzerland, it is primarily sex, nationality and educational qualifications that are decisive in whether the transition to a regular training relationship has a positive outcome. In the 1960s it was the metaphor of the 'working-class Catholic girl from the country' (Peisert, 1967) that stood for educational disadvantage, but today it is the weak male student from a 'secondary modern' type school and from an immigrant family who fulfils this role. He is the main loser in the context of modernisation. On the other hand (although this statement possesses empirical validity only for Switzerland), the young male national continues to have the best opportunities, even if he has not achieved excellent educational qualifications or if he already has behind him a lengthy phase of getting his bearings (Haeberlin et al., 2005). This does not, however, apply to young women, who are subject to much stricter criteria. We know, for example, from the German Shell study (2002) or the Anglo-Saxon study focusing on Europe by Warner Weil et al. (2005) that many young people, particularly girls, feel threatened by the problem of unemployment long before they complete their compulsory education. For 12-18-year-olds, the fear of one day being without a job is now stronger than any other fear. However, almost 50% describe work as the most important or second most important of five areas of life (family, work, community association activities/friends, leisure time, religion). Thus the data *also* show clearly that nowadays the traditional formula according to which being young means being cool and unencumbered no longer applies, or applies only superficially. This is indicated by the relevant research studies (Kieselbach, 2001; Richter, 2004; Imdorf, 2005; Reissig, 2005), which show that even brief experience of involuntary unemployment leaves young people with traces of insecurity, doubt, resignation, social isolation or health problems. A particularly serious problem is the calling into question of membership of the group of trainees or employees and the ensuing enforced retreat into the family, which in turn leads to a delay in the separation process, which is already in any case a potential source of conflict.

Against the background of these scientific findings, it is essential for individual States to treat youth unemployment as a priority issue. The fact that, at least in Switzerland (Eidgenössisches Volkswirtschaftsdepartement, 2005), there have been passionate arguments about drafts of education-policy measures shows that the problem is being taken seriously. Nevertheless, the entire debate is based on a burden-oriented scenario based on a deficit. How, then, are young people to develop a spirit of hope and confidence?

Coping skills in place of burden-oriented scenarios

Our European 'society of labourers' is currently in the midst of a fundamental crisis to which no end can be foreseen, but only an end to the hope of a return to full employment. This statement may not be true of all the countries of Europe, but nowhere do unemployment and its consequences appear to be merely a transitory manifestation, so it would seem that changes must be made in the longer term (Beck, 2005). The problem affects us all, not only the younger generation but also the older generation, the majority of whom have hitherto been in stable employment.

So all the signs indicate that we need to abandon both the straitjacketed concept of the society of labourers and our ideas of linear transitions to working life. We must learn to live with imponderables, gradually freeing ourselves of the illusion of full-time employment and of waiting for things to improve. The answer to the question of who is equipped to cope with life will ever less often be 'the person with a secure job' and ever more often 'the person who is competent to handle transitions'. In future, life as a whole will become a transition for everybody. This means that a dual coping task ensues, firstly a socio-political task facing society as a whole, and secondly a need for young people affected by unemployment to cope with their working career.

However, if we focus only on the suffering involved in youth unemployment, we cannot manage transitions. What is needed instead is a change of direction, from a burden-oriented coping paradigm based on a deficit to a competence- and resource-oriented coping paradigm (Krafeld, 2000; Stauber, 2004). However, it is not just the young people affected by unemployment who need to change direction, but all of us. 'Burden' implies 'endangering', sees young people as victims, and promotes resignation and feelings of powerlessness. In contrast, 'coping' or 'management' is based on developing potential, sees the unemployed as subjects and actors, considers every situation to be open to development and change, and promotes self-confidence and strengthening of the individual, even in times of crisis. However, the previous adherence to the burden-oriented paradigm was an initial necessary and important step towards actually recognising the dramatic nature of the situation. To persist in this view now is, though, a retrograde attitude, an adherence to anachronisms, which gets in the way of identifying the viewpoints necessary. The paradigm of coping behaviour is the optimistic response, designed to strengthen young people and to enable them to achieve successful career patterns, despite the stressful situation in terms of finding jobs. However, coping strategies do not come about of their own accord. They are primarily the product of the society immediately around the young people, including the behaviour of positive role models in the shape of the adults close to them and those who guide them.

Consequences

A concept formulating coping strategies for an uncertain working future would be of great significance in developing prevention and intervention measures in the context of youth unemployment. However, only a marginal quantity of the relevant knowledge exists. So more research is needed into why certain young people are resilient and survive phases of unemployment undamaged. 'Resilience' is understood as meaning people's capacity to overcome crises with the aid of personal and social resources and to use them as an opportunity for development. Concepts such as salutogenesis and coping are related to the concept of resilience (Holtmann, Schmidt, 2004). All these concepts add to the orientation towards deficits and burdens the alternative viewpoint of *coping/management*. We must, however, concede that research into resilience and coping in general is still in its infancy, and that we know little about productive forms of coping in the context of youth unemployment. They probably include measures such as the promotion of ways of finding an identity not restricted to paid employment, mobility training, or the capacity to come to terms with changing conditions. The development of strategies for resolving problems and conflicts, of positive self-awareness, of stress-management skills or training in self-effectiveness should, however, be to the fore.

Ultimately, the whole problem of youth unemployment lies in the collective imagination. Our burden-oriented attitude encourages such trends. State support and sponsorship measures are on the right track, but education and training do not consist only of state-organised provision. They also involve discussion, conversations with oneself, and the social participation of society in dialogue with those involved. And there is a shortage of this in Switzerland – and probably also in many other European countries. Our young people are in urgent need of images of success. They must be given at least what is most lacking in the current difficult debate – primarily, strategies, communicative exchanges and the participation of society, to enable them to cope with uncertain future prospects.

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